

The Destructive Impact of Racism on African Americans in Alex Haley's Roots

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Abstract

Alex Haley's Roots: The Saga of an American Family (1976) is a powerful narrative that traces the legacy of African Americans from their roots in Africa to the experience of slavery in America. This paper explores the destructive impact of racism on African Americans as depicted in Haley's work. Focusing on the generational story of Kunta Kinte and his descendants, the paper analyzes how the institution of slavery dehumanized African Americans, stripped them of their identities, and perpetuated systemic oppression. It also examines the resilience of African Americans, emphasizing the struggle for freedom, identity, and self-determination. This paper aims to demonstrate how Roots not only provides a historical account of racism but also offers a broader reflection on the psychological and emotional scars left by slavery that continue to impact African American identity.

Keywords— racism, African Americans, slavery, identity, and resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is a groundbreaking piece of American literature. Its breathtaking reach and scope encompass several generations of an American family, beginning with Kunta Kinte, a young man captured in his Gambian village, and extending down through the years of his descendants, who number many in the United States today. That narrative in itself is worth the price of admission because of its gripping detail and the way it builds in momentum and tension. But that is not the main reason for the book's having found a prominent place in American culture. That reason is found instead in the author's exploration of the deep and enduring consequences of slavery, racism, and systemic oppression in American society.

Racism, which has inflicted unspeakable damage on the lives of African Americans, is deeply ingrained in *Roots*. It has been the most potent and persistent force in the life of America, starting with the slave trade, which brought some 12 million Africans to the New World. Of

those, 10 million survived the hellish Middle Passage. Once they arrived, they endured the most inhumane conditions, working themselves to death, tearing apart their families, and erasing their identities. That much is clear. However, the terrible cost that not only the slaves but also their descendants have endured remains unclear.

The narrative of dehumanization and degradation can't help but affect the story that Alex Haley tells in his book *Roots*. But characterizing that story exclusively in terms of forces working against human dignity would be a mistake. *Roots* tells an essential tale of identity. Who are African Americans? Kunta Kinte, his family, and his descendants must grapple with this fundamental question. When they consider the narrative that humanity has constructed over the past several hundred years, particularly in North America and the Caribbean, the story of *Roots* provides a compelling counterpoint to the assumption that life was inventive and worthwhile only for a privileged few.

The legacy of racism, however, does not end with the abolition of slavery. The novel illustrates how racial discrimination persists in new forms, such as the practices and the segregation of the Jim Crow era that followed in the wake of Reconstruction. Through these continuities, Haley shows us how racism is built into the very structure of American society and how it affects not just the lives of African Americans but the aggregated national psyche. *Roots* moves deep into the aftermath of slavery to tell us what happened next and next again. Once the moment of slavery has been transcended, what does the narrative of racism look like? What do "freedom," "dignity," and "equality" mean in the ongoing racist rubric that circumscribes the African American experience?

This paper seeks to examine the destructive impact of racism on African Americans in *Roots* by focusing on the ways the novel's characters reclaim their identities from systemic oppression. The first section will explore the loss of identity and degradation suffered by African Americans during slavery. The second section will address the racism that continued after slavery, affecting Haley's descendants as they grapple with the stubborn legacies of racial oppression. The third section will highlight the way those same descendants, through Haley's telling of their story, have reclaimed both their identity and their humanity, overcoming forces that would have rendered them defiantly not human. All of this illustrates how racism's long reach, both ancient and modern, affects not only those it targets but also those who aim it. Indeed, one could accurately describe the effects of this poison as a profound pathology.

II. THE LOSS OF IDENTITY AND DEHUMANIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

One of the most profound impacts of slavery on African Americans, as shown in *Roots*, is the loss of identity. Kunta Kinte must abandon his African name, cultural practices, and language from the moment of his abduction and sale into slavery. This removal of identity significantly symbolizes the broader racial oppression system. This stripping of Kunta's identity represents a more massive historic event. This stripping is arguably more significant in its lasting effect, and certainly in the time it took to occur, than the individual acts of physical harm inflicted upon millions. Kunta's experience is not unique; for many, their entire cultural ancestry has been erased, as well (Haley 45).

The abduction of Kunta Kinte from his home in Africa marks the beginning of his identity crisis. Slave traders capture him and brutally beat his body for refusing to answer to the name "Toby," which they give him. This moment of violence underscores the dehumanizing nature of slavery, which not only denied African Americans their freedom but also stripped them of their autonomy, family connections, and cultural identity (Vine 102). Throughout the novel, Kunta's efforts to maintain his African name, his memories of his homeland, and his sense of self serve as a form of resistance to the overwhelming forces of oppression that sought to erase his humanity (Haley 47).

When Kunta is sold from one plantation to another, his physical and psychological suffering intensifies. The novel emphasizes the cruelty of the slave system, which treated African Americans as property instead of human beings. Slaves were compelled to work long hours under harsh, inhumane conditions, with no one regarding their welfare or emotional state (Patterson 58). The system dehumanized its victims by forcing them to work in the harshest conditions without regard for their health. But it went farther than this, too: slaves were beaten and abused physically to instill fear, and over the decades of this system, the toll on mental health was incalculable (Haley 50).

III. THE CONTINUATION OF RACISM THROUGH GENERATIONS

Kunta Kinte's story is central to *Roots*, the novel also traces the racism and legacy of slavery down through the generations. Haley depicts not just the Kinte family's experience of post-slavery racism but also the lifetime kind of racism that African Americans suffer. Despite the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery, African Americans face systematic oppression, forms of racism, and ideals of white supremacy that continue for the minute-by-minute 24/7 lifetime after one walks out of the womb (Kendi 133). *Roots* traces all that bad medicine from one generation to the next.

Even after the abolition of slavery, African Americans had to contend with laws and social structures that ensured the continuation of racial inequality. The author underscores that although Africans in America had been freed from slavery, they were not granted full citizenship or the equality that was proffered so cavalierly to white Americans. Some historians and social scientists view the period directly after the Civil War as part of the unfinished business of the American Revolution. The structures from the past took on new

forms and continued to cause devastation in the lives of African Americans (Du Bois 201). Sharecropping, for example, was just a more hitched-up way of loading the backs of African Americans with chain-like structures that kept them in subjugation. And alas, even the kind of piecemeal progress enjoyed by Chicken George doesn't seem to lessen the kind of hate that white folk have for Black folk or the kind of love that Black folk have for both the kind of progress that Chicken George and Kunta Kinte seem to enjoy (Haley 213).

Psychological and emotional scars from slavery continue to mark characters in *Roots* long after they have been freed. The trauma from the brutal, dehumanizing system of oppression affects how African Americans see themselves and their society, whether separated by the years of an ancestor's suffering from the present or not. Even as individuals strive to establish new lives, they continue to remember and respect the legacy of the past. The story does not end with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation or even the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s; it goes on to this day. One can always find contemporary issues that tie back to the past, and when they are viewed through the lens of that history, their significance becomes even clearer (Haley 220).

IV. RESILIENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Racism and the generational trauma from slavery that still affect African Americans today are powerful forces, but Alex Haley's novel, *Roots*, ultimately illustrates something far different and far more valuable: the resilience of African Americans in their ongoing struggle for identity and self-determination. The characters in *Roots* refuse to allow racism to define them, projecting a potent counter-narrative that underscores the value of the cultural heritage passed down from one generation to the next. While Kunta Kinte is powerless against the forces that would "transform" him into just another mindless, obedient slave (Hall 134), his quest to retain his African identity while living in America—the America that would try to erase his identity—is a powerful symbol of the baselessness and wrongheadedness of those who would try to uphold a system of racial superiority.

The journey of Kunta Kinte is one of survival, both physical and emotional. Even when he is enslaved and subjected to unimaginable cruelty, Kunta remains unwavering in his refusal to accept the new identity being forced upon him: "Toby." His refusal to answer to

the name assigned to him by his captors is, in effect, an act of resistance that transcends the physical limitations of slavery (Haley 56). Kunta's insistence on remembering his African heritage is a symbol of the broader fight, still ongoing today, for cultural preservation and self-determination among African Americans. The novel presents this as a necessary and difficult struggle, as each subsequent generation finds itself embroiled in new and insidious forms of racism. However, the way in which Haley depicts this fight makes it clear that the very act of struggling with identity—African or American, historical or contemporary—is what continues to define and redefine African American "being" (Gates 202).

The character of Kunta's descendants allows Haley to emphasize the legacy of resilience passed through generations in his family. No amount of racism can strip away their identity, as Chicken George's life clearly demonstrates. By the middle of the 19th century, when the events depicted in the latter portion of the book unfold, an entire system of slavery has been constructed that lives off of the economic, intellectual, and cultural components necessary to power any society. Undeniably, racism has achieved a significant and powerful foothold in American life; for African Americans, it clearly aims at the very roots of their identity (Haley 221).

V. CONCLUSION

Alex Haley's *Roots* is not just a straightforward historical account; it digs deep into the psyche and the profound emotional toll that racism has extracted from African Americans over several generations. With the Kunta Kinte saga, Haley has offered us not only an intimate portrait of his forebear but also a broad and deep account of the bitter, dehumanizing toll that slavery exacted and the long struggle for identity and self-determination that African Americans have engaged in ever since. The image that Haley paints is unflinching and difficult to confront, but we believe it is essential for all Americans to see.

A central theme of *Roots* is the loss of identity that Kunta Kinte and his descendants suffer. Slavery sought to erase not only the physical control of African Americans but also their cultural and personal identities. Kunta's brutalization, forced renaming, and psychological torment illustrate the depth of the racial violence that African Americans have suffered. The impact of this dehumanization is far-reaching, affecting not only the initial victims of this violent force during

slavery but also their descendants. Despite being born free, these descendants continue to struggle with the profound psychological scars that slavery left on their families, as well as the ongoing racial discrimination that continues without end in sight. In this way, Haley reveals the long-lasting impact of racism, which permeates not only the physical experiences of enslaved individuals but also the lives of their descendants across generations.

Additionally, *Roots* makes clear that racism destroys far more than just individuals. The plot of the novel starkly reveals, even to those unaware, the ways in which institutions, schools, churches, or governments have long conspired to assail the character and humanity of African Americans. The issue is not limited to individual bigots but rather the institutionalized racism that exists within and beyond societal structures. But there is also a far-reaching vision of what such racism does to the very fabric of society as a whole that is contained in the novel.

Haley's novel is one of hope and empowerment. In the face of incredible adversity, the characters of *Roots* refuse to accept their victim status—not just in history, but in the ongoing present. They demonstrate the profound resilience and determination of African Americans. This portrayal highlights the unrelenting pursuit of basic humanity and dignity by African Americans.

One of the most consequential aspects of *Roots* is Haley's examination of the identity and heritage of his characters. These two aspects are crucial as they provide the characters with their source of strength. The personal and communal aspects of Haley's exploration of identity and heritage are what give this novel its depth and resonance. What makes this exploration all the more powerful is the fact that the author engages with it on both a personal and a communal level. What Haley does is not simply part of an individual's quest for self-discovery; it is also a part of a much larger story that African Americans have been telling since the first generation of their ancestors. It is a part of the story of how African Americans have been inching their way across the path from slavery to freedom. In this story, cultural heritage and identity play a vital role as meanings and as influential symbols and signs along that path.

As *Roots* nears its end, Haley reflects on the importance of understanding one's lineage and the value of knowing one's past. Haley's search for Kunta Kinte's descendants serves as a powerful metaphor for the

African American quest for identity and self-discovery. The search for truth and the struggle for self-expression are both intertwined, as Kunta's own story illustrates. Like Kunta's story, this search is often characterized by pain and hardship, but it is also one that can lead to a deep sense of purpose and belonging. This search for the truth gives us two glimpses into Haley's family line and the black viewer's own African American past. If, on the one hand, the destruction wrought by racism holds down the identities of individuals, then the act of remembering serves as a reclamation and renovation of identities past; thus, by taking pride in one's heritage and history, one may very well be near to fulfilling the act of retribution or a payback against the racism and injustice from without and within.

At its core, *Roots* is a testament to African Americans' unwavering resilience in the face of unrelenting oppression and a powerful assertion of their history and identity. Haley's work encourages readers to delve into the profound—for some, too profound—history of racism in America. But it isn't just the history that is challenging. What is equally challenging, and even more disturbing, is the insight this history provides into America today. This is the remarkable strength of *Roots*.

To conclude, *Roots* shows the deep and profound effects of racism over time on African Americans, but it also demonstrates a pathway toward identity and self-determination, which serves as a kind of plan for cultural preservation. African American readers will relate to the book's theme of accepting themselves despite others' attempts to change them. Another theme is the almost unbearable determination to persevere in the face of opposition, with the hope that one day they will have the same rights as everyone else.

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